

Church Reform and Church Defence: the Contribution of Principal John Tulloch (1832-1886)

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Nineteenth-century Scotland gave at least four outstandingly great men to world Christianity: Thomas Chalmers the ecclesiastical leader, John Macleod Campbell the theologian, David Livingstone the missionary-explorer, and William Robertson Smith the Biblical scholar and pioneer of what used to be called comparative religion. While in no way ranking with them, there was a second cohort of able and devoted figures — Edward Irving, Alexander Duff, Hugh Miller, Norman Macleod, John Cairns, Robert Rainy and George Macdonald spring to mind — who played important parts in the life of the Church and nation, in literature or learning; and among those I should certainly wish to include the present object of our consideration, Principal John Tulloch of St Mary's College, St Andrews.¹

Born in 1823 in the Perthshire village of Dron, where his father was parish minister, young Tulloch went to St Andrews for the study of Arts and Divinity; and although his academic performance was not exceptionally brilliant, he spent only a short time in parochial work, first in Dundee and then in Kettins (Angus), before the government of the day selected him for the much-sought-after dual appointment of Principal of St Mary's and Professor of Theology in his old university. There he remained from 1854 until his death in 1886. While frequently lamenting the meagre financial provision made for himself and his family, and sometimes tempted by the ampler opportunities which chairs at Glasgow and Edinburgh seemed to offer, he nevertheless found much to delight him in the quiet but sociable East Neuk of Fife; and almost the only shadow upon his enjoyment of academic office, its duties and its privileges, was cast by the mysterious and desolating attacks of nervous depression which dogged him from early manhood to the very brink of old age.

He travelled far during the incredibly long vacations of that halcyon age; poured out a steady stream of articles and books

¹ There is a good, if typically Victorian, biography by Margaret Oliphant, *A Memoir of the Life of John Tulloch, D.D., LL.D* (1888).

(most important being *Rational Theology and Christian Philosophy in England in the Seventeenth Century*, his *magnum opus*, and the St Giles' Lectures for 1885 on *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain during the Nineteenth Century*; dabbled not unhappily in university politics; and lectured with acceptance to his small but admiring classes. He served as one of the Commissioners of the Board of Education set up in 1872, and played an active part in the negotiations for university reform which bore fruit in the acts of 1858 and 1889. For a short time at the end of the eighteen-seventies, he was editor of *Fraser's Magazine*; and his friendships came to include some of the best-known literary personalities of the day. He eventually acquired a standing with Scottish church folk — and with their queen — similar to that enjoyed a little earlier by Norman Macleod and a little later by John Caird; and in 1878 he was called to the moderatorship of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Such a story enables us to understand how Tulloch's death in 1886 seemed to many like the end of an era. Within his lifetime the Auld Kirk, recovering from the shock administered to it by the Disruption (which took place towards the close of his training for the ministry), gradually acquired some expertise in dealing with the challenges of urban, industrialised society, forged new evangelical weapons and refurbished old ones, discarded many of the constraints imposed upon it by seventeenth-century puritanism, refashioned its worship on more catholic lines, and set about re-defining its relationship to the system of doctrine whose best-known formularies are the Shorter Catechism and the Westminster Confession of Faith; and few, if any, of the Church's servants could claim a greater responsibility for the transformation brought about in the Scottish religious scene by these enterprises than John Tulloch. One of the most eminent and influential representatives of Scotland's "broad church" school — and, incidentally, a staunch friend and admirer of his opposite number in England, Dean Stanley of Westminster — he led the way in that revolutionising of the presbyterian *Weltanschauung* which took place between 1850 and 1900; and towards the end of his life he came, rightly, to be regarded as the very embodiment of the liberal churchmanship of the Victorian period.

In seeking to summarise the characteristic beliefs and attitudes of Tulloch the Church reformer (the first part of this paper), we may conveniently focus our attention on four quite short addresses which he gave to academic and other audiences during the first twenty or so years of his teaching career: the inaugural lecture, "Theological Tendencies of the Age", delivered at St Andrews in 1854; an introductory (opening-of-session) lecture, without a title, delivered there ten years later; an address on "Theological

Controversy” given to Edinburgh University Theological Society in 1865; and “Religion and Theology: a sermon for the times”, preached in Crathie parish church in 1875. The following themes occur and recur in these highly personal yet, at the same time, carefully considered programmatic statements:

(i) *Devotion to “inquiry” and an intense dislike of “dogmatism”*:

Tulloch was always well aware, particularly in the middle years of his life, that the spirit of unbelief — of “anti-supernaturalism” and “subjective criticism” — was abroad in Victorian Britain. “There is”, he once remarked, “much of a doubtful and negative character in the mere literary atmosphere we are all breathing.”² But he differed from many of his contemporaries in maintaining that against such a foe ecclesiastical condemnation was of little avail, and could in fact do much positive harm. “I must venture to say”, he told his young hearers in 1864, “that the most ominous and saddening signs I can see on the religious horizon are not the spirit of inquiry, whether within the church or without it, but the unreasoning dogmatism with which in many cases this spirit has been met. The spirit of inquiry may be harmful . . . but it is not necessarily either injurious or dangerous; while one has only to open any page of the New Testament, or study any century of Christendom from the beginning, to see that a blind and angry dogmatism is no weapon of spiritual warfare, and can never advance the cause of truth.”³ Moreover, the type of unbelief at work in the ’fifties and ’sixties was such as to render violent dogmatism peculiarly inappropriate. “The assailants of the old views of Christianity”, he observed, “are for the most part of philosophical temper, and of quiet thoughtfulness. They can only be met with any success in a corresponding spirit, with the weapons of a higher thoughtfulness, a more conspicuous moderation, and a fairer learning.”⁴ Quoting the advice of one of his heroes, John Hales, that “If it be the cause of God which we handle in our writings, then let us handle it like the prophets of God, with quietness and moderation, and not in the violence of passion, as if we were possessed rather than inspired”, Tulloch continued: “There is no higher task for the Christian reason in every age than to vindicate the eternal basis of Christianity as a truth for the reason no less than for the conscience and the heart, as the highest philosophy no less than the highest expediency. To abdicate this rational ground of defence is to confess the Gospel to be a superstition — to acknowledge a hopeless schism between reason and conscience, between philosophy and religion. . . . No doubt the

² Introductory Lecture (no title, 1864), 11.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Church has its rights of utterance — its power to condemn as well as its duty to inquire and defend — but none the less true is it that men no longer heed utterances which are not weighty in argument as well as in tone, nor bow before a condemnation which is not reasoned as well as authoritative.”⁵ Gentle and level-headed inquiry, dialogue rather than denunciation, are what Tulloch admired and was ever seeking to commend.

(ii) *Conviction that neither undiluted Rationalism nor undiluted Traditionalism is the way to Truth:*

The greater part of Tulloch’s inaugural lecture in 1854 was devoted to a discussion, and rejection, of two prominent tendencies in theology and religious life which he believed to be characteristic of his time. There was, in the first place, what he called traditionalism, by which he meant “not merely the recognition of an element of traditional authority in theological investigations . . . but the exclusive supremacy of this element in some shape or another”.⁶ One of its chief manifestations was in the Anglo-Catholic school, for whom (he contended) “the great question in matters of doctrine was not, ‘What saith Scripture, under the scrutiny of reason or the Christian consciousness?’ but ‘What saith the Church?’” Tulloch was not insensitive to the virtues of the Oxford Movement, as he shows in the closing pages of his chapter on it in *Movements of Religious Thought*; and the inaugural also contains a glowing tribute: “The genuine earnestness of the men who first engaged in it, and the depth of sacred conviction from which it has sprung, will not be denied by any who have given it their candid attention; and we must no less acknowledge the consummate scholarship, the range and subtlety of intellect, the fine and beautiful comprehension often of the real import of the Church’s history . . . — especially, perhaps, the exquisite literary skill displayed in the writings which it has called forth.” At the same time, however, he rejected Anglo-Catholicism as being “utterly opposed to our sympathies”, and used the phrase “purely disastrous” to describe its effects on Christian theology.⁷

The other manifestation of traditionalism, which Tulloch found even less congenial, was old-style Evangelicalism as he encountered it in his own country. It too (according to him) rejected the claims of reason and conscience, this time in the interest of a narrowly confessional interpretation of Holy Scripture; and once again the consequences were devastating: “The general evidence of this traditional tendency”, he wrote, “. . . is a slavish adherence to certain religious formulae — a timid cowering from the glance of Reason as something which it is felt

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ “Theological Tendencies of the Age” (Inaugural, 1854), 6-7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

somehow ought to be acknowledged, but which it is not known how to acknowledge. . . . However it may profess to acknowledge the right of private judgment, there is nothing less known, and nothing less tolerated by the adherents of this school than any free and fruitful exercise of this right. Authority, in fact, has here, in certain cases, established itself in a far more inflexible, as in a far less dignified and impressive form, than in Catholicism. And, as irresistible evidence of this, we find this school, of all, the most utterly destitute of a living and learned Theology.”⁸ One can understand why Tulloch, having condemned Evangelicalism for its basic irrationality, would sympathise with men like Irving and Erskine of Linlathen and McLeod Campbell (all of whom had run up against it) and with F. W. Robertson (who had thrown it off after a struggle). His frank enthusiasm for Coleridge also becomes comprehensible, for it was Coleridge — he believed — who “once more in his age made Christian doctrine alive to the Reason as well as the Conscience — tenable as a philosophy as well as an evangel”.⁹

But if Tulloch eschewed traditionalism he felt equally unhappy with the most obvious alternative to it, namely rationalism. In each and all of its many forms (he himself referred to the “positive”, the “intellectual”, the “intuitionist” and that associated with the name of Friedrich Schleiermacher) its aim seemed to be “to find the determining element of theological truth in some purely inward or subjective standard”; and with this he could not agree.¹⁰ “If the original revelation of Reason is not to be rejected”, he told his students, “the later objective revelation in Scripture must withal remain the standard and arbiter of Truth. . . . The Bible must be acknowledged as not only co-ordinate with Reason, but as forming, in all points of religious truth, the ultimate *determining* authority.”¹¹ And although by the end of his life Tulloch had somewhat modified his hostility to Schleiermacher, his favourable comments in *Movements of Religious Thought* on Julius Hare and Connop Thirlwall and other disciples of the great German theologian imply no fundamental change in his position.¹² That, as his criticisms of John Stuart Mill and others also reveal, remained to the end what it had been in the 1850s.¹³ In the words of his Inaugural, he opposed rationalism “not because it embraces a subjective element of determination in Theological Science, but because in different forms it embraces nothing else”, setting up

⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁹ *Movements of Religious Thought* (Victorian Library, 1971), 19.

¹⁰ “Theological Tendencies of the Age”, 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹² *Movements of Religious Thought*, 34-8, 75-9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, ch. 6 *passim*.

“the shifting standard of the human spirit” as the sole arbiter of Christian truth and science.¹⁴ And his conclusion on the whole matter was as follows: “On the one hand, we can have no fruitful and vigorous Theology without the continual, ever-renewed inquest of free criticism — practical religion, even, perishes under its decay: on the other hand, the Bible must ever limit and bind all such progressive inquiries, for here we have no longer the word of man but the word of God. . . . Its light, therefore, must at once guide and circumscribe our onward course.”¹⁵

(iii) *Historical approach to all credal formulations:*

As an appendix to the published version of his 1865 lecture to Edinburgh University Theological Society on “Theological Controversy, or The Function of Debate in Theology”, Tulloch printed some notes on the Westminster Confession of Faith which are of interest as condensing his views on a subject which exercised the Scottish mind throughout the greater part of the century. Observing that the propriety of Confessions of Faith would soon become a crucial question for Christian people, he called for historical and philosophical study of the Church of Scotland’s “subordinate standard”. “The Confession of Faith in its origin and in its principles”, he claimed, “was the manifesto of a great religious party which, after a fierce conflict, gained a temporary ascendancy in England and Scotland.” And he went on: “Indeed, the same thing could be said of every Protestant Confession of Faith. . . . They are one and all historical monuments, marking the tides of religious thought as they have swelled with greater fullness in the course of the Christian centuries; and none of them can be understood aright simply by themselves, or as isolated dogmatic utterances, but only in connection with their time and the genius and character of the men who framed them.” The consequences of such a view were far-reaching. In Tulloch’s words: “The popular ecclesiastical notion of creeds and confessions as in some sense absolute expressions of Christian truth — *credenda* to be accepted very much as we accept the statements of Scripture itself — is a notion . . . which every student deserving the name has long since abandoned. Those creeds and confessions are neither more nor less than the intellectual labours of great and good men assembled for the most part in synods or councils, all of which, as our Confession itself declares, ‘may err, and many have erred’. They are stamped with the infirmities no less than the nobleness of the men who made them. They are *their* best thoughts about Christian truth as they saw it in their time — intrinsically they are nothing more; and any claim of infallibility for them is the worst of all kinds of Popery — that Popery which degrades the Christian reason while it fails to

¹⁴ “Theological Tendencies”, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

nourish the Christian imagination.”¹⁶ Tulloch’s historical approach to all credal statements is, of course, only one aspect of his tendency to view a very wide range of questions, and particularly Biblical ones, from the historical angle. In this he revealed himself as sharing in — and helping to spread — a mood which had begun to establish its ascendancy over the cultivated intellect of Britain round about the middle of last century. It was a mood which (to quote a historian from our own time) inclined men to view Truth “no longer as absolute, philosophically static, revealed once for all, but as relative, genetic and evolutionary”;¹⁷ and for theology its implications were tremendous. If Tulloch did not see all of them, he at least saw some; and his teaching was the more valuable in consequence.

(iv) *Hatred of “bibliolatry” and a cautious confidence in the methods of Biblical Criticism:*

Few things annoyed Tulloch more than what he called “subjective criticism” — meaning by that an essentially unsympathetic and hypercritical attitude to the Bible. Such criticism, he averred in his introductory lecture at St Andrews in 1864, “partakes of the very spirit of unbelief — the spirit, namely, which refuses to recognise a Divine revelation at all — sets its own light against the light of God, its own reason against the divine reason in Scripture.”¹⁸ Yet even here his essential moderation shows itself, for he never falls into the opposite error of “bibliolatry”, never asserts the absolute identity of the Bible with the Word of God. Although he can affirm that “The fact of an objective revelation, and that Scripture contains such a revelation, are primary and constitutive facts of Christianity”, he nevertheless also contends that “not only does Christianity not dread — it demands, as a condition of its higher intelligent life, that the several books of Scripture, as the successive media of Divine revelation through a long series of ages, should be minutely investigated, tested and proved by all the aids of criticism, and by all the growing light of the Christian consciousness.”¹⁹ He counsels us, moreover, to learn to distinguish between the Divine revelation in Scripture on the one hand and our inherited beliefs, prejudices and conceits on the other. This relaxed attitude towards the literary and historical approach to Scripture — this belief, as he put it, that “the Christian reason must have room to work”²⁰ — is clearly evident throughout Tulloch’s writings. It appears not only in the approval given to Coleridge’s liberal views on the subject but also in the

¹⁶ “Theological Controversy” (1865), 26-7.

¹⁷ N. Annan, “The Strands of Unbelief”, 151, *Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians* (1949).

¹⁸ Introductory Lecture (1864), 14-15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

complimentary references made to the exegetical labours of Arthur Stanley and Benjamin Jowett. "From this time", he once wrote of the year 1855, when both men published commentaries on Pauline epistles, "has greatly advanced that profounder study of the New Testament, which looks beyond its traditional to its real aspects and its organic relation to contemporary usage and opinion — which sees in it a living literature, and not a mere repertory of doctrinal texts. . . . The text of Scripture has been studied in its own meaning, and not in support of dogmas which were the growth of long after centuries, and would have been wholly unintelligible to the writers credited with them. The spirit has been liberated from the letter, and the very form and pressure of divine truth as originally presented to the world brought near to us."²¹ Crudities and perhaps inconsistencies notwithstanding, this is a view which would still, nearly a century later, commend itself to a high proportion of theological scholars — which suggests that in reading Tulloch we not only survey the religious thought of a bygone period but also glimpse the shape of theologies yet to come.

(v) *Desire to distinguish between theology and religion:*

Tulloch's Crathie sermon of 1875 on *Religion and Theology* makes a distinction which appears repeatedly in his writings. He would not (so he tells his hearers) have them despise or disparage theology. But he wishes them to remember that the welfare of the soul is not determined by theology and its answer to such problems as "The antiquity of man, the age and genesis of the earth, the origin and authority of the several books of Scripture." These matters have to be dealt with, admittedly, and in dealing with them there is available to us "no light but the dry light of knowledge"; yet the satisfaction of our spiritual requirements need not await their solution. "Because I cannot be sure", he wrote, "whether the Pentateuch was written, as long supposed, by Moses, or whether the Fourth Gospel comes as it stands from the beloved apostle, am I less in need of the divine teaching which both these Scriptures contain? Surely not. That I am a spiritual being, and have spiritual needs craving to be satisfied, and that God is a spiritual power above me, of whom Christ is the revelation, are facts which I may know or may not know, irrespective of such matters. The one class of facts are intellectual and literary. The other are spiritual if they exist at all. If I ever know them, I can only know them through my own spiritual experience; but if I know them . . . I have within me all the genuine forces of religious strength and peace." Better than all theological definitions, therefore, is "the honest and good heart' which (in the Gospel phrase) 'having heard the Word, keeps it, and brings forth fruit with patience.'"²² And so Tulloch's last

²¹ *Movements of Religious Thought* (1971), 332.

²² "Religion and Theology" (1875), 10-13.

word on this matter is a summons to rigorous inquiry on the theological level, together with quiet receptivity on the religious level. As he told the congregation at Crathie: "I have no ready answers to your questions, no short and easy method with modern scepticism. Inquiry must have its course in theology as in everything else. It is fatal to intelligence to talk of an infallible Church, and of all free thought in reference to religion as deadly rationalism to be shunned. . . . You must examine your own hearts; you must try yourselves whether there be in you the roots of the divine life. If you do not find sin in your hearts and Christ also there as the Saviour from sin, then you will find Him nowhere. But if you find Him there . . . then you will accept difficulties and doubts, and even the despairing darkness of some intellectual moments, when the very foundations seem to give way, as you accept other trials; and, looking humbly for higher light, you will patiently wait for it, until the day dawn and the shadows flee away."²³ There are echoes here not only of Tulloch's beloved Caroline Divines, but also of the views of Coleridge and F. D. Maurice and (still more) of F. W. Robertson and Scotland's Thomas Erskine.

To sum up what has been discovered so far, I think we can say that Tulloch's message as a church reformer was, above all else, a summons to humility of spirit and receptivity of mind. Change, he constantly asseverated, is always at work in human affairs, even where the most apparently immutable attitudes or systems are concerned, and in the world of the intellect to be immobile is to be dead. Let us, therefore, be prepared to abandon old shibboleths and to welcome new insights; and let dogmatists — especially Scottish ones! — never forget that God's truth is larger than their imperfect notions of it and that "the movements of Christian thought are for this very end, that we may prove all things and hold fast that which is good".²⁴ And, as he puts it in the closing sentences of his last book:

"What we perhaps all need most to learn is not satisfaction with our opinions — that is easily acquired by most — but the capacity of looking beyond our own horizon; of searching for deeper foundations of our ordinary beliefs, and a more sympathetic appreciation of the beliefs of others. While cherishing, therefore, what we ourselves feel to be true, let us keep our minds open to all truth, and especially to the teaching of Him who is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life'."²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, 21-2.

²⁴ *Movements of Religious Thought* (1971), 335.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 335-6.

Tulloch's "broad church" convictions eventually won through to respectability, and even acclaim, within his own denomination and beyond it. He was (as we have seen) elevated to the moderatorship in 1878, and during the closing years of his life he was accorded a virtually unique status in academic and other circles. But no sooner had he weathered one storm than another — politico-ecclesiastical, this time, rather than theological — burst upon him; and the last ten or fifteen years of the Principal's life were chiefly spent in battling not for the liberalisation of the Church but (at least in his understanding of things) for its very survival.

Percipient observers are nowadays inclined to think that danger lights had been flashing for the Auld Kirk ever since the extension of the franchise in 1867 and the formation of Gladstone's crusading first ministry soon afterwards. But it seems to have been the disestablishment of the Irish Church in 1869 which really gave the signal for Scotland's Presbyterian Dissenters — virtually all the United Presbyterians, and a very high proportion of Free Church men — to launch a campaign for the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of Scotland that came within an ace of success on more than one occasion during the next two or three decades. At the very time when the Auld Kirk, at last on the way to recovery from the trauma of the Disruption, was trying to persuade parliament to free it from the age-old incubus of patronage and so to pave the way for a reunification of Scottish Presbyterianism within the walls of the national Zion, the United Presbyterian Church (led by Principal John Cairns) and the Free Church (led by Principal Robert Rainy) began to speak with one voice in favour of the destruction of that same establishment.

As early as May 1872, the Synod of the United Presbyterian Church set up a Disestablishment Committee; two years later, the Free Church did the same; and in 1877 its General Assembly definitely pronounced in favour of disestablishment. For at least two decades thereafter the Church of Scotland was under fairly continuous threat, though circumstances looked less menacing while the Conservatives held power at Westminster between 1874 and 1880. How was the danger to be met? It may be said that the Auld Kirk's leaders — Tulloch conspicuous among them — decided on a three-fold strategy, each part of which was pursued in close connection with the others: first, they developed what might be called a philosophy of establishment in answer to the criticisms of the Voluntaries; second, they alerted their fellow-churchmen to the baneful potentialities of the situation, as well as acquainting them with the arguments that could be proffered in the Church's defence; and third, they exerted pressure upon the politicians (especially Liberal ones, whose links with Dissent created many problems) in order to dissuade them from responding

favourably to the increasingly vociferous calls for disestablishment that were addressed to them. We now turn, therefore, to an examination of Tulloch's part in the carrying out of this programme, paying special attention to his justification of establishments in general and of the Church of Scotland in particular, and relying in the main upon the speeches which he made in the General Assemblies of 1878 (as moderator), 1882, 1883 and 1885 (the last two as Convener of the Church Interests Committee, for whose creation he had been largely responsible), the 1885 "Address to the People of Scotland" (of which he was the chief signatory), and his final utterance on the subject, the posthumously published *St Giles' Lecture of 1886 on "National Religion in Theory and Fact"*.

One of the Principal's main concerns throughout is to highlight the various misconceptions on which the disestablishment campaign is based.

(a) There are, to begin with, the related notions that the National Church is a mere creation of the State (or at best the beneficiary of a concordat with the State), and that any connection between Church and State is inevitably harmful to spiritual interests. The former is a distortion of history: "The Church of Scotland as it now exists is no doubt, in its civil rights and privileges, a parliamentary institution. The act of the first Scottish parliament of William and Mary, in the spring of 1690 (April 25), established the Presbyterian creed, church government, and discipline. In other words, it established and ratified, in its present form, the Church of Scotland. But not only was the reformed church already in existence as the religion of the people, but the reformed church itself was only a new outcome of Scottish religious faith which, from the beginning, had been one of the most powerful elements of the national civilisation. At no period of Scottish history, many as are its transformations, can religion be said to have been formally adopted by the government and set up for its own purposes."²⁶ The latter notion (on the harmfulness of the Church-State connection) errs even more seriously in that it disjoins the spiritual and the natural, the sacred and the secular. "The truth", Tulloch contends, "is that nowhere can the spiritual be isolated and caught by itself. . . . The Church is distinct from the world in idea, but never in fact. . . . To suppose a Church to be more spiritual because it has clothed itself, so to speak, with a body of its own, instead of having fitted itself to the national organisation and order, is simply an imagination without any true meaning when analysed. The Voluntary theory, therefore, or the theory of a radical divorce in the nature of things between Church and State is not only unhistorical, but essentially unveracious.

²⁶ "National Religion in Theory and Fact" (1886), 42-3.

There can be no such divorce. Every church, by its mere existence, entwines itself more or less with the State, and incurs legal relations and obligations. The higher attributes of the State . . . imply the working of Christian principles within it, or in other words, an incorporate religious life; and again the Church, by its simple activities, by the fact that it is a body and constitution as well as a soul, touches the State, with its complex machinery of law and order, at every point. Instead of being separate, or tending to separate, they tend to merge at every point, and to run up into the same magnificent ideal.”²⁷

(b) Another favourite contention of the Voluntaries was that the very existence of an established Church violated the great principle of “equality”. In the appeal “To the People of Scotland”, which was issued in the run-up to the elections of 1885, however, Tulloch sees this “dubious” word as summarising “all in the shape of general argument that is put forward for the destruction of the Church”, and counters with the dictum that “What is called ‘religious equality’ becomes, when fairly looked at, a gross injustice.” Or, as he puts it more extensively, “‘What is required’, it is said, ‘is *religious equality* in the eye of the law for every denomination of Christians.’ But are not all denominations — Protestants and Catholics, Presbyterians, Free Church, United Presbyterian, Episcopalian — already equal in the eye of the law? Each and all are equally free to worship God according to their conscience. Free Churchmen and United Presbyterians are certainly not repelled from the parish church by any difference of creed, worship, or government. They simply prefer their own Church. But why should they on this account wish to destroy the parish church as a national institution? What is this but to say — We do not differ from you in creed or worship, but because we don’t go to the parish church you shall not have it to go to. Of our own will we refuse a share in the old endowments of the country, and we will not let you have a share, however content you may be with your portion. . . . Any property we have is our own, but the property of the parish church is ‘national’, — ours as much as yours; and we intend to take it from you, and from the poor who have so long enjoyed it. Is there anything Christian in such an argument as this?” And so his contentions reach their forceful conclusion: “No equality can be violated where no rights are invaded. *There are no rights of Dissenters affected by the existence of the parish church.* If I am entitled equally with others to a share of anything of which I am deprived, my rights would be invaded. But if I am offered my share and decline to have it, preferring something else, what right have I to complain? That I should not only decline my own share, but insist that others on my account

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64-6.

shall have no share, is surely the height of absurdity and injustice.”²⁸

(c) As the matter just dealt with makes abundantly clear, disendowment was almost indissociably connected with disestablishment on the Voluntaries’ agenda for Scottish reconstruction. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Tulloch devoted a good deal of attention over the years to their argument that the teinds were either an unjustifiable tax on the people or a gift from the State which could at any time be removed from the Church’s possession and devoted to other — secular — purposes. Of his many trenchant remarks on the subject, what he had to say towards the very end of his life is particularly worth quoting. “It cannot be too clearly borne in mind”, he declared in the Church Interests Committee’s address “To the People of Scotland” in 1885, “that the teinds, which are the support of the Church, are in no sense a tax upon the community. They do not cost the people anything. They are an ancient property belonging to the Church, for the religious benefit of the people. . . . The opponents of the Church are driven to sad shifts when in this, as in other instances, they are compelled in the face of facts to misrepresent Scottish history.”²⁹ And he develops the same theme at greater length in his St Giles’ Lecture of 1886 on “National Religion in Theory and Fact”, where he writes: “There can be nothing less true to the facts of the case or evidence of history, than to suppose that what is called the “State Church” in either country [England or Scotland] has been called into being merely by State legislation, and endowed by State funds, and that it is equally competent for the State to withdraw what is called its support as it was originally to bestow it. What was never bestowed may, no doubt, be withdrawn by legislative power, because this power is in a certain sense omnipotent in relation to all privilege and property; but certainly there is no ordinary sense in which it can be said that the revenues of the Church were created and allocated by the State. They were the gifts of individuals, for the spiritual benefit of the people, and in a true sense, therefore, the property of the Church so long as used consistently with their original gift. Any wanton interference with the property of the Church is as unjustifiable, therefore, as interference with any other species of property. . . . The revenues really belong to the parishes in which they are gathered, for a definite purpose, and they can only be alienated by repudiating, not merely ancient law and usage, but considerations of moral equity and government.”³⁰

Underlying all that the disestablishers said and did (so Tulloch

²⁸ “Address to the People of Scotland” (1885), 6-8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁰ “National Religion”, 61-2.

believed) was the assumption that religion is essentially a private, domestic matter — whereas in his opinion it was, and must be, inextricably bound up with the organised existence of the entire community. “Religion”, he affirmed, “cannot be separated from the fibre of our national existence, and placed on one side of it as something essentially apart from it, without injury — it may prove fatal injury — to our old power and greatness”; and he recalled how the young Gladstone had once remarked that “We may tremble at the very thought of the degradation she [the State] would undergo, should she, in an evil hour, repudiate her ancient strength, *the principle of national religion*.”³¹ Still more memorably, in a speech of almost Burke-ian eloquence delivered at the Assembly of 1883, Tulloch repudiated the idea of a National Church as being “a mere aggregation of endowed churches”: “It is”, he declared, “an organisation of the spiritual life of the nation — an institution created by the nation and existing for its sake, embodying the great thought that religion is not merely a private but a public concern — that the civil aspect of society is merely one aspect of our national life inextricably intertwined with the higher religious aspect, which deserves recognition, organisation, and support, no less than the other. This alone makes a National Church in the true sense, and is the idea which really lies at the root both of the Church of England and of the Church of Scotland. . . . Every truly national institution rests on an ideal and not a merely material basis. It is the embodiment of some higher thought which has established itself in our national history, because it has first dominated and inspired our national intelligence. In this sense alone are National Churches absolutely defensible. . . . Is our national life to be Christian or not? Is the State a moral and not merely a secular reality? These are the real questions that underlie Establishment or Disestablishment.”³²

Being the Church of the whole nation, as Tulloch contends, the Church of Scotland is clearly not the preserve of the wealthier classes; and to suggest that it constitutes a serious distortion of the truth — particularly in the aftermath of the 1874 Patronage Act and its democratisation of the ministerial election process. Phrases like “the Church exists for the people of Scotland” and “What we should think of is the good of the people of Scotland” occur and recur in Tulloch’s writings; and he seems to go out of his way — perhaps in recollection of the still-remembered Chalmers tradition, perhaps in deference to the growing social consciousness of the eighteen-seventies and ’eighties — to emphasise the special concern of National Churches for the well-being of their poorer citizens. “The Gospel” (he affirms in 1886) “has been in this generation

³¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³² Quoted in M. Oliphant, *Memoir of Tulloch*, 421.

‘preached to the poor’ within the national churches as nowhere else. While prosperous Dissent in our large towns has been gradually removing its centres of worship and of Christian work from the poor and crowded localities to be found in all these towns, these churches have stepped in and taken its place, and prosecuted Christian agencies in a manner which the merely voluntary churches have hardly anywhere attempted. We say this in no spirit of boasting. God knows the national churches of our country should have awakened far earlier than they did to this most urgent work, and done still more than they have done; while our dissenting churches have had a share in the labours of love, and care for the poor, which has happily inspired modern Christianity. But nowhere has the modern spirit of philanthropy — a bright foil to many spots of darkness in our social atmosphere — been realised more vividly or worked out with more intelligent and solid results, than within the two national churches.”³³

At this point we should perhaps note that Tulloch’s indictment of Voluntaryism is directed not only against its basic convictions but also against its animating spirit, which is (in his opinion) one of jealousy, bitterness, dogmatism and illiberality. The jealousy is no doubt a reaction to the increased prosperity of the Church of Scotland, now recovering after its post-Disruption years in the wilderness. The bitterness is evident in the many exaggerations of the disestablishment campaign. The dogmatism and illiberality are detectable, *inter alia*, in Cairns’s strictures on the alleged rationalism and ritualism of the Auld Kirk, and move Tulloch to agree with his old friend, Dean Stanley, that “Establishment is a liberal thing, and Dissent is both narrow and narrowing.” And there is even more to be said. The Voluntary movement is disturbingly clerical in its composition and management. Because of its connections with Edward Miall’s Liberation Society it is open to the charge of being an English export. Worst of all, its appearance of devotion cannot cloak its essentially irreligious associations and consequences. As early as 1838, Gladstone had suggested that the campaign for English disestablishment was impelled not only by the force of Nonconformity but by “all the enemies of law, both human and divine”: in his darker moments, Tulloch suspects that an equally sinister alliance may be at work in the Scotland of the eighteen-eighties. “The State”, he writes, “is regarded as entirely secular in its constitution and origin, and to be worked without any religious reference whatever. So prevalent is this idea that it has become a commonplace even with many religious people — a commonplace used for political ends, without any clear understanding of the essential principle which lies involved in it, and how far it cuts into the heart of national life.

³³ “National Religion”, 52-3.

. . . 'Religion is too sacred for politics'; 'the school is to teach secular, and the churches religious instruction'; 'no public funds must go to the teaching of religion in any form'; 'theology, instead of being, as in the old times, the queen of the sciences, is, strictly speaking, not knowledge at all, but only a sort of shadow or imagination of knowledge' — are the sort of sayings one hears everywhere. They mark the rise of that current of Secularism which is inundating the civilised world. Still more significantly than in Mr. Gladstone's youth, they come not only from the side of Nonconformity, but from those who are waging war against all religion whatever.'³⁴

But it is more than time that we came to the heart of Tulloch's case for establishment. It is, quite simply, the old Reformed conviction — eloquently enunciated by John Calvin, adhered to by John Knox, battled for by the Covenanters and in no way denied by the settlement of 1690 — that an Established Church stands, as no "sect" can, for the sovereignty of God and the headship of Christ over the nations. Chalmers held it "when his manly intellect was in its prime". So did Candlish, "with all his subtlety". So did McCrie, "the greatest among our older Dissenters".³⁵ And Tulloch would stand with them. Of all his speeches on the subject of establishment and disestablishment, none seems to have been more impressive than that which he delivered at his last General Assembly, the Assembly of 1885: from it we may quote some sentences whose message is essentially the same as was contained in many other, more low-key, utterances of previous years. "The Church of Scotland" (so runs the passage which evoked the loudest cheers) "is an Established Church. Because it is so, it is a witness for the great principle of a Christian State and of the maintenance of national religion; and it cannot forego that principle. It would forego its very existence if it did. . . . We must stand somewhere. We stand here. . . . Presbyterianism is dear to us, and all that is grand and heroic in its traditions . . . ; but it is not more valuable or more a principle of the historic Church of Scotland than that of national religion — that the Lord whom we serve is Head and King of nations as well as of Churches, and that a National Church is the only true expression of the homage which nations owe the Supreme Head, and of the manner in which Christianity should pervade all national life and society. . . . I would shut no door to Presbyterian union — nay, I would open the door as wide as possible. But there would be no use of doors at all, open or shut, if the citadel is surrendered; and to hope to strengthen Presbyterianism in Scotland by surrendering that which has been its central principle from the first — national religion — is to me a

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 53-6.

³⁵ Speech in Assembly of 1882, 14.

dream as wild, and a hope as impracticable of realisation, as ever entered into political imagination.”³⁶

In the last analysis, however, I suspect that Tulloch’s enthusiasm for a national Church was due not so much to its vision of a whole nation subject to Christ as to its implications for religious life at the local level. It is the parish church ideal which really fires his imagination; and though there is more than a touch of Victorian sentimentality — and archaism too — about the picture he paints, one cannot doubt the affection which he feels. “The very idea of the parish”, he writes in what was to be his final message to his fellow-countrymen, “. . . is national. It is the product of State churches, unknown — save in a wholly different sense — in America and the colonies. . . . If our national Churches had done nothing else for the country than plant into the national heart the idea of the parish, with all its sanctified and benign activities, they would have done for us something more than all dissenting churches together. And it may be questioned if any access of spiritual force, supposing such an access possibly to follow Disestablishment, would compensate for the breaking up of this idea and all its associations. Look upon the parish church as it is known by thousands in England and Scotland. . . . Think of the charities as well as benedictions which radiate from it as a centre — blessing for the babe entering upon life, and for the sire closing it; the kindly visitation for the sick-bed, the help for the weak, the counsel for the strong; and all this from generation to generation linked each to each by natural piety. There never were sources of well-being — of Christian light and leading — comparable to the parish churches of our country. . . . And shall we sacrifice all this to the demands of an unfeasible religious equality. Shall we displace the parish minister, living in his own modest manse, and dispensing his modest bounties, temporal and spiritual, for the clamant hedge-preacher, or the Nonconformist zealot, living by the favour of some rich town congregation or patron, with a gospel of zeal rather than of peace — of dogma rather than of charity. Let us hope not. If we do, we shall never be able to replace the old picture. Our country parishes may not sink into spiritual darkness, but they will never be as they have been, the homes of an ancient piety, which has grown beautiful during years of quiet, and which is all the more fruitful and true because it does not cry, nor lift up its voice in the streets.”³⁷

Inspired by this philosophy, and conscious of the threat posed by the disestablishment campaign to all that he held most dear, Tulloch turned his back on the relatively peaceful seclusion of academic pursuits and gave himself up, during the last fifteen years

³⁶ “The Church of Scotland and its National Position”, 10-11.

³⁷ “National Religion”, 69-71.

or so of his life, to the agitations and demonstrations, the manoeuvring and lobbying which we associate with the world of politics. He proved to be a remarkably successful operator there, as even the briefest summary of his activities and achievements may reveal.

(i) He realised, sooner than most, the dangerous situation created for the Auld Kirk by the Voluntaries' increasing bellicosity and their determination to capture the Liberal party and its leaders for their views. As early as 1868 he had a word of warning for the General Assembly apropos of Irish disestablishment (soon to be achieved): "It is all very well to say that there is no logical connection between the Church of Scotland or the Church of England and that of Ireland. There is no logical connection; but political movements do not move by logic. Unquestionably when you think of the principles that are moving many parties who strongly support Mr. Gladstone, you cannot but apprehend grave results from them."³⁸ And in July 1878 (some years before the Church Interests Committee came into being) he told his friend Robert Story that "The impression made upon me by all I heard and learned in London . . . is very unfavourable to the prospects of the Church as an Establishment. Should the Liberals return to power, there is simply no doubt whatever of the Disestablishment question being raised. . . . I feel quite sure I do not exaggerate in the least, and unless something is done to enlighten public opinion in England about the Scotch Church, our days are numbered".³⁹ Whoever else was surprised by Dick Peddie's disestablishment motions in 1882 and 1884, Tulloch certainly was not.

(ii) He did as much as anyone in Scotland to alert the Church to these dangers, and to initiate counter-measures. It was a speech of his which persuaded the General Assembly of 1882 to set up the so-called Church Interests Committee "to watch over, and take any steps they may think necessary and advisable in regard to any questions or measures which may be brought before the Legislature affecting the interests of the Church."⁴⁰ And as its convener he presided until his death over that committee's imaginative and energetic activities in the cause of Church Defence: the production of pamphlets, the organisation of public meetings, the lobbying of M.P.s, the pressurising of candidates, and so on.

(iii) He strove — not altogether ineffectively — to persuade the politicians that it was not enough simply to secure a majority of Scottish M.P.s (still less, a majority of Scottish Liberal M.P.s) for disestablishment. As Gladstone himself once said (and was never allowed to forget it), the country as a whole must be consulted on the issue, plainly and openly. "We are not willing", he told

³⁸ *Scotsman* report, quoted in Oliphant, *Memoir*, 241.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 326.

⁴⁰ Speech in Assembly of 1882, 1-2.

Glasgow Elders' Association in 1879, "to have so grave a question as this, the existence of the old national Church of Scotland, treated as a side issue; it ought to be put fairly to the country. It is perfectly fair of any Liberal candidate . . . to say, 'I do not approve of the existence of the Established Church; that is my opinion, and my vote will be in accordance therewith.' Or again, it is fair to say, 'This question has not yet come within the sphere of practical politics; I have no opinion about it; but before I give a vote I will come back here to put the question to you, and the question will be put to the country.' All that is fair. But it is not fair for a man to come before a constituency and to evade this question, and then to go to Parliament and allow himself to be numbered by the head as a Church abolitionist and to vote according to the exigencies of party; he having been sent there, in the case, so far as I know, of every Liberal candidate, by hundreds of votes that would never have been given if he had taken up the attitude he in fairness should have done. . . . I have no fear of the verdict if the issue is put directly before the people."⁴¹

(iv) During the important elections of 1885, he argued that Liberals loyal to the Auld Kirk should put the Church issue before everything else, and even be prepared (as he was in East Fife) to see a Conservative candidate returned if the interests of Establishment could be served in no other way. "You can only defend your rights", he told the Scottish people at that time, "by making the Church a primary question in the forthcoming election. We do not ask you to vote for this or that candidate, or to prefer one political party to another. We do not meddle with general politics; but we ask you seriously not to vote for any candidate who is pledged to Disestablishment irrespective of a direct appeal to the wishes of the people."⁴² If Scottish Liberalism was eventually as split on the establishment question as on Home Rule, a good deal of responsibility can be laid at the Principal's door.

(v) Above all, Tulloch laboured — and laboured successfully — to provide the politicians with a different picture of the Scottish ecclesiastical scene from that which was given them by the Voluntaries: a picture which had at its centre the statistical facts. As he put it in the address "To the People of Scotland", "The Church of Scotland desires nothing more than 'a fair trial'. It might claim to rest on its prescriptive rights. It might appeal to the fact that the establishment of the Church of Scotland is declared in the Treaty of Union between England and Scotland 'to be a fundamental and essential condition of said Treaty or Union in all time coming.' But the Church is willing to be judged on its merits." Among those merits, he believed, was its numerical superiority in membership over the Free Church and the United Presbyterians

⁴¹ Quoted in Oliphant, *Memoir*, 346-7.

⁴² "Address to the People of Scotland", 8.

combined. "Its communicants, which, according to a Parliamentary Return in 1874 . . . numbered 460,000, had increased four years later (1878), according to a similar Parliamentary Return, to 515,000; and there are now in full communion with the Church of Scotland 555,622 communicants, while with the Free Church there are only about 254,000, and with the United Presbyterian Church 178,042 — or in all 432,042."⁴³ Even more impressive in this connection were two great demonstrations of the strength of the establishment which Tulloch masterminded in that crucial year, 1885. The first was a petition of over 500,000 Church of Scotland members, together with 150,000 adherents of other Churches, against the Disestablishment Bill: an extraordinary achievement in a mere three weeks' campaign. The second (equally remarkable in its own way) was a Declaration against disestablishment signed by 64% of all the electors in the parishes of Midlothian, Gladstone's own constituency, on the eve of the 1885 elections. Shown to the Liberal leader just before a crucial speech in the Free Church Assembly Hall on 11 November, this Declaration may well have tipped the scales against a promise which he was expected to make at that meeting in favour of disestablishment.⁴⁴

There is much to be said for the view that the battle for disestablishment had been lost by the end of 1885 — and that in spite of the fact that the Grand Old Man finally declared in its favour in 1889, and that there were moments in the early eighteen-nineties when it seemed within an ace of success. Even before Tulloch's death in 1886, Gladstone had committed himself to Irish Home Rule: from that time onwards, Liberal unity (long a fragile thing) was shattered, and other matters than disestablishment in Scotland absorbed the time and attention of the politicians. The Conservatives held power from 1895 to 1905; and when their rivals eventually returned it was becoming clear that old ecclesiastical animosities had lost their potency and that Scottish Dissenters were about to forsake disestablishment for reunion as a remedy for their country's religious ills.

If 1885-86 was the turning-point of the disestablishment campaign, as seems probable, then Tulloch deserves much of the credit for the Auld Kirk's triumph over its enemies. But we saw earlier that he was also a leading figure in the liberalisation of religious life and thought in Scotland during the second half of the nineteenth century. In the twin fields of Church Reform and Church Defence it is to be doubted whether any of his Victorian fellow-countrymen laboured as perceptively and indefatigably, or achieved as much.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁴ The story, dramatically told, is in A. Gordon, *The Life of A. H. Charteris* (1912), 400-402.